

December 8, 2003

Ms. Patricia O'Neill  
President, Board of Education  
Montgomery County Public Schools  
850 Hungerford Drive  
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear Pat:

As you know, about a month ago I convened a Community Forum on Childhood Obesity. One of the panel discussions centered on nutrition in the public schools, and included a discussion of the issues surrounding vending machines.

I applaud the Board's efforts to address the issues, and I look forward to hearing the findings and recommendations of the task force that has been assembled as a result of a resolution by Ms. Cox. I know that you have also proposed a resolution regarding vending machines, and I thank both of you for taking action this important issue.

While I will not take a position on your resolution, I would like to outline my position on vending machines in schools. This is an issue to which I've given a great deal of thought and careful consideration. As a father and as Chair of the County Council's Committee on Health and Human Services, I am very concerned about the kinds of food that are offered in schools. I am also aware of the tremendous need for the additional funding that vending machines provide, particularly in high schools.

The two areas of concern are: (1) the poor nutritional value of items currently offered in vending machines; and (2) the use of vending machines to market brand names to students.

I understand that the items currently sold in vending machines in our county schools meet the current standards in place for nutritional value. If these standards permit the sale of Pop-Tarts, candy bars and other snacks of low nutritional value that I have seen for sale in the machines, the standards need re-evaluation. Perhaps we could worry less about the hours that the vending machines are turned on, if we had much higher standards in place for what is put into the machines. I hope the task force will take a close look at this. Many jurisdictions in the country have made such changes, and some have actually experienced an increase in revenues when healthier choices are made available.

When it comes to marketing brand names to students, it seems to me that our schools should not be an environment that fosters aggressive commercialism. My solution is not simply to eliminate vending machines altogether, but to see what options are available. Are there machines without corporate logos all over them? Can the machines be placed in less prominent places? I'm sure there are other options that would also adequately address the issue.

This Thursday, December 11 at 10:00am, I will re-convene the planning committee to follow-up on the November 5 childhood obesity forum, where we will discuss next steps. Members of the Board of Education are more than welcome to join us.

Thank you again for your attention to the issue of childhood obesity.

Best regards,

George L. Leventhal  
Councilmember